

Reflections on Lost World of Genesis One

Recognizing our Bias

Introduction

The Lost World of Genesis One is an apologetic using what we now know about the Ancient Near East to clarify how to read Genesis differently than we typically have. Walton carefully analyzes the concepts of the Ancient Near East and compares them to how the Bible develops those concepts.

This essay is not a reiteration of the apologetic work done by Walton but assumes Walton's conclusions are correct. With that assumption, this essay reflects on the ideas presented in "The Lost World of Genesis One." Sometimes I will reach into Biblical text beyond Genesis 1 as I reflect on the material.

Reading the text

To understand the Bible, we need to understand what the Biblical writers meant to communicate to the original audience within their cultural setting and worldview. We will necessarily distort the meaning of the Biblical text if we read it as if it was written directly to us in our cultural setting and worldview. While it is true that many of our basic current human needs are in common with the basic needs of the original Biblical audience, the details are very different, and many basic words do not easily translate directly from the original language to ours.

For most of church history, there has not been substantial enough cultural background known about the ancient history of Israel to enable us to be certain about being able to answer. "How would the Biblical writings have been understood by the original Israelites?" Fortunately, over time, more and more research has been done in Ancient Near East studies, particularly in recent decades, that it is now more reasonable to attempt to answer that question.

As we try to now answer that question, we need to keep in mind that the meanings of words and cultural symbols change from one time to another and from one place to another. In our case, as we try to understand the cultural background of ancient Israel, we need to keep in mind that the words and cultural symbols that Israel used may have understood differently than the cultures around them. Therefore, to correctly understand the meaning of those Biblical texts, scientists not only need to be careful of their own preconceived notions, but they also need to carefully analyze the use of words and symbols within both the Biblical text and within the texts of their surrounding cultures.

Re-reading the text

The Hebrew Bible is sometimes referred to meditative literature. Before the advent of the printing press, most people did not have the written text so they could only access it by listening to it being read. As there are not many texts to be read from, there was time to think about and meditate on the text before hearing it being read the next time. When you heard a second text you could think about and meditate on that new text, then think about and meditate on how the second text adds meaning to the first text and the first text adds meaning to the second text, etc. Listen carefully, Think carefully.

Today we have too much text to read and sometimes too little time to read, making it easy to overlook the benefits of thinking and meditating practiced by the original hearers of the Biblical text. The insight that led to John Walton writing this book came from realizing that God created light but then called the light, "day."

Reading carefully and thinking carefully led to John Walton's insight that reading Genesis with a modern Western mindset led to an incorrect interpretation of Genesis 1. Combining this new insight with knowledge of what we now know about the ancient near east led to seeing that Genesis 1 was intended to describe the creation of the cosmos from a functional viewpoint instead of a materialistic viewpoint. This new reading also eliminated some problems generated by a materialistic interpretation of creation.

The why of origin stories

It seems that every civilization has needed to produce origin stories. He does not address why. Why is a universal question that we all seem to automatically ask beginning as children; it seems to be built-in to us as God's image-bearers. When we consider that origin stories tend to be functional ontologies, they seem to address the why of our existence. They provide the meaning of our existence.

All origin stories have a limit. They have a beginning while necessarily being unable to truly answer what came before. That limit even applies to our modern-day scientifically constructed origin stories. Our stories always begin with some unknowns but our need for meaning forces us to create these stories.

Our thinking has limits. Even our very thinking and thought processes need to start somewhere. We do not start life with blank minds. We come into the world with brains designed to enable us to be stewards of the world that God provided for us. Starting from the time before we are born, we have various experiences as we interact with the world around us and learn to cope with our circumstances. To help us learn how to cope, we typically have the families and communities that we are born into who give us the languages and concepts, and even our origin stories to help us discover who we are and the meaning of who we are.

The limit of origin stories

Whether it is through stories that are passed from generation to generation or from learning and research, we have to deal with the limits of our knowledge and wisdom. Our modern-day origin stories tend to be infused with science and the ability of scientific research to dig deeper and deeper into the how's and what's of how we might have come to be, but even that knowledge is limited. Then we either have to accept the end of our knowledge or to make assumptions about our beginnings, where we need to leave the realm of science and enter the realm of philosophy or theology. So even our modern scientifically based origin stories end in philosophy and mythology.

Ancient Cosmology

God knows how to communicate with His people. He speaks today as He spoke back then, speaking in ways that can be understood by the people He is speaking to, using the language and cultural constructs appropriate for each person. God spoke to Moses in the language Moses understood and Moses wrote to the Israelites in the language they would understand.

Today, in our translations when we read “heaven” and “earth,” we think about a globe spinning around the sun surrounded by the stars of a galaxy. And when we read of creation, we think of how objects are brought into material existence (*material ontology*). In the time of Moses, they thought about “*olam*” and “*eretz*” the sky above them and the land they walked on. When they thought about creation, they thought about how objects become functional and serve a purpose (*functional ontology*).

Today, we consider the natural and supernatural realms of the universe to be separate things and may even consider that the supernatural realm does not exist. In the time of Moses, there were no words for natural and supernatural because the realms of the spiritual and the physical were intertwined.

Today, when we think of the state of the universe before creation, we think of empty space, nothing materially exists. In the time of Moses, they thought of the state of the universe before creation, they thought of chaotic waters, there was no order and no function of whatever may have materially existed. When something or someone was created out of the chaos, that meant that that something or someone became ordered, was given a function and a name. Naming was part of providing meaning and purpose by identifying the role and function of people, places and things.

A matter of words

Introductions

The first word in Genesis 1 is *bereshit* בְּרֵאשִׁית, typically translated as “In the beginning.” *Bereshit* is used as a literary introduction to introduce a period of time (that is, the entire creation activity described in Gen 1) rather than a point in time (as if Gen 1:1-2 specified as a separate creation event that occurred before the creation activity specified in Gen 1:3-31).

Bereshit is also used to introduce another literary structure. Genesis covers a long time period beginning with the creation event and concluding with four generations of the patriarchs of Israel. Most of the periods, eleven of them, are successive periods marked by the word, *toledoth* תּוֹלֶדֶת usually translated by the phrase “the account of” or “the generations of.” The first period is the one beginning of Gen 1, and begins with our word, *bereshit*.

The Deep - Unproductive, Empty, Dark

What is the earth before God gives it meaning? What is it to exist materially but have no purpose? What is it to live aimlessly wandering in no direction? This is the description of the world: unproductive (*tohu*), empty (*bohu*), dark (*choshek*). It was the chaotic waters of the abyss (*tehom*). It would be a place of no hope, but Genesis reveals a cause for hope. The Spirit of God (ruach Elohim) was hovering, brooding (*marachephet*) over the waters like mother bird sitting on her eggs. The dark, aimless, unproductive, empty world would be transformed.

Creating purpose

When we make things, we start with materials we find around us and shape it into something useful for us. A stick can be made into a spear, a pile of wood can be made into a fire, raw metal can be made into coins, a wire spinning around a magnet can be made into electricity. We can even shape organizations with people, making civic organizations and governments.

If we look at the Hebrew word for create, *bara*, we find a similar use. *Bara* mainly is used when God takes materials to shapes them into something fit for His use. This is not to say that at some previous time, God made the raw materials of the universe, but Genesis 1 does not talk about that. In Genesis 1, God is usually described as separating the elements of the Deep into purposeful domains, giving purpose to those domains and their inhabitants, and acknowledging that purpose by giving them names.

Another Hebrew word, *asha*, sometimes translated as “made” and sometimes translated as “do,” can be used to describe either to the material making of things or functional making of things. In the context of Genesis 1, it could be translated in another sense of the word, which is “to do” things. Which means, in Genesis 1 we could change the translations to read, “in six days the Lord *did* the heavens and the work,” etc. And that would maintain the consistency of the functional creation throughout the chapter.

It is interesting to note, that as God shapes things for His use, it seems that those things that are made for our use. He has provided us with a world fit for us to live in, to rule in His name, to multiply in and fill, to join God in His plan to expand His kingdom. When God creates things or creatures and they fulfill the purpose God gave them, God says that they are good (*tov*).

In the days of creation, God speaks, and His words impose order. And when God finishes imposing His order on the heavens and earth, the heavens and earth will be a place where He dwells with His image-bearing creatures as His image-bearing creatures expand God's kingdom through the world.

Occupations

The end purpose for the heavens and the earth is to provide what is necessary for humans to sustain themselves, and grow and thrive as they act as the stewards of His creation. There are three major occupations (functions) to be carried out.

Time

For most of history, the universe was considered to be eternal; an eternity that headed nowhere: the gods and the people kept on doing the same things over and over with nothing ever getting better. But now, God will give purpose to the periods of light and dark to mark time, a time in which He will work out His plans to bring His Kingdom into the world and then growing it. The light period was called day (*yom*) and the dark period was called evening (*erev*). And they were called good

Weather

The waters of the deep, the waters of chaos, were given purpose when they were divided into the waters above (*shamayim*) and the waters below (*mayim*). What separated the two waters was a solid dome called the firmament (*raqia*). Rain was thought to be water leaking through the *raqia*. The rain by itself was not declared good, for there was no land and no plants to be watered.

Food

The waters (*mayim*) were gathered together and called the seas (*yamim*) so that dry land (*yabashah*) would appear which would be called the earth (*eretz*). And they were called good. And then the earth brought forth grass, herbs and trees which bore seeds so that they could reproduce. And they were called good.

Occupants

The next step was for God to fill the spaces with objects or creatures to carry out functions prescribed by God. The spaces of day and night were filled with the sun, moon and stars whose purpose was to provide signs for the humans, helping the determine festivals. The spaces of heaven above (the firmament, *raqia*) and the waters below (*mayim*) were filled with birds and fish and even the creatures of chaos (later identified as the behemoth (*bahāmōt*) and leviathan (*livyātān*)) whose purpose was to multiply and fill the earth. The spaces of the earth (*eretz*) were filled with living creatures (*chai nephesh*) such as livestock (*behemah*), and creeping things (*remes*), whose purpose was to fill the earth. And that was good.

After all the other creatures of the sky, land and sea were in place, there was one more thing to do to finish the creation of heavens and earth. God now needed to create creatures who would bear His image and who would rule God's creation on His behalf. So God made the humans (*adam*), male and female. He blessed them and instructed them not only to multiply and fill the earth as with all the other creatures, but then also subdue the earth and rule it. In the other creation stories of the time, humans were created to serve the needs of the gods, but in Genesis, humans are created to serve with God.

Historical, Prototypical, Archetypal Humans

To clarify the creation account in Genesis 1, Walton does a brief foray out of Genesis 1 which addresses the general creation of humans.

The Genesis 2 account can seem to conflict with the Genesis 1 account. In Genesis 2, *Adam* is described as being formed from the dust of the earth, and *Eve* (*Chayah*) is described as being made from the side of Adam. While it seems that this is to be read more literally, we can see in later Biblical texts that we all are described as being created from the dust of the earth. Being created from the dust of the earth points to our mortality. So Genesis 2 is really talking about Adam in *archetypal* terms, that is, Adam is serving as the model for the rest of humanity.

In Eve's creation account, Adam has a vision of Eve being formed from the side (not rib as commonly translated) of Adam, making her a sexually different but equal partner with Adam. Again, this serves as an archetypal reference that is followed by "For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh." This serves as a reference for all of us, that marriage is a making whole, a rejoining of what was separated at the beginning.

These archetypal references to Adam and Eve do not mean that we cannot still view them as historical individuals, nor does it mean that Adam and Eve are not the prototypical humans that we are all descended from.

The Cosmic Temple

What is a temple. It is a place where God can dwell, and we can be invited to dwell with him. A temple is the place where God rules from. In this respect, we can read, as other ancient near east cultures would have read, that Genesis 1 is describing the making of a cosmic temple. The six days of creation serve as the time of dedication of the temple, and the seventh day is the day God ceases the act of dedication after which He (and we) can settle into the temple and begin doing the work of the temple.

In Genesis 2, the language used to describe the responsibilities of Adam, to “work it and keep it” can be used to describe agricultural or priestly duties. We were meant to be priests, God’s representatives, in the garden, which served as a sanctuary, a place where God could meet with His people.

Later on, as we read the descriptions of the tabernacle and the temple, we can see how they incorporate symbols representing aspects of the Garden of Eden and the cosmic temple.

The Sabbath, a time to cease one activity so that we can settle into another

Exodus 20:11 expands on the meaning of the seventh day. It says, “For in six days the Lord made (did, *asa*) the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested (*nuach*) on the seventh day. Therefore, the Lord blessed the Sabbath day (*shabbat*) and made it holy. Another way of saying it, is that on the seventh day the Lord ceased (*shabbat*) the work of dedication so that he could *nuach*. We could say that six days were allotted to the work of dedication and the seventh day is the date of inauguration and the temple could be used

Translating *nuach* as rest leaves out the other meanings of the word, it can also mean to settle into. In fact, we know that, firstly, God did not get tired, and, in fact, stayed involved in the work of the temple, which is to oversee His creation, for we know that He did not just do the initial creation and then abandon us. To this day, He is at work in the world, and we are called to work alongside of him.

Issues and objections

God’s role in the material origins of the universe

Viewing Gen 1 as an account of functional origins does not rule out that God at some prior point perform the material creation of the universe (Col 1:16-17)

Death before the fall

Some think that Romans 5:12 statement, “sin entered the world through one man and death through sin,” means that death did not occur at all before sin, but Romans 5 is talking in terms of death coming to people. Humans were created mortal, and after sin, when humans were denied access to the Tree of Life, that is what subjected them to death.

The literal, face-value interpretation of Genesis?

The Bible contains different types of literature, and within each literary section, different literary techniques are used. Any face-value interpretation needs to take that context into account. The thesis here, is that face-value account (now that we understand the ancient culture better) is that Genesis 1 is an account of functional origins. This does not rule out other levels of reading Genesis one such as: 1) its use as a polemical text attacking the other ancient near east stories 2) its literary structure and richness of interpretation that offers. However, it does rule out the need for a *concordist* reading which tries to match the biblical passage to materialist scientific interpretations such as Gap Theory, Young Earth Creationism or Old Earth Creationism.

The work of God: Creating and Sustaining

Creating: Genesis 1 describes the creative work of God leading to the inauguration of His cosmic temple.

Sustaining/Maintaining: When God began to dwell in His temple, He did not stop His work and simply let the universe continue on its own (that would be *deism*) nor did He continue the work of dedication His temple as if that work never ended (that would be *recurring creation*). After the inauguration of His temple, God’s work shifted to the maintenance of His Creation (that would be *sustaining*)

Ruling in the Sacred space

The human charge to rule the world is not open-ended. We rule on behalf of God, it is His universe, His temple, His sacred space. The human rule is constricted to ruling on His behalf, with His priorities, His values. Our charge is make God’s sacred space bountiful and productive.

Observing the Sabbath

We are not obligated to live as Jews under the law with the law serving as our teacher. We are to live under the Spirit. However, the law can provide guidance to how we live in the Spirit. So while we are not under the command of Sabbath observance, we should regard how it is instructive. The Sabbath observance was, and for current Jews, still is a time of recognizing God’s provision and setting aside distractions that hinder us from focusing on God and the families and communities that He has provided.

We should recognize that the Genesis creation account did not specify an end to day 7. We are living in Day 7, we are continually living with God in the seventh day. We are *nuaching*, settling into God's temple with Him committing ourselves to the tasks that He assigned us to do. The Christian Sabbath observance is not limited to one day, but every day we are committed to doing His work. The New Testament does not charge Christians to observe the Sabbath, but it does specify that we are a part of God's Body and should be committed to using the spiritual gifts He provided to build up others in His Body, be willing to sacrifice ourselves for others, and gather to worship with His Body. We have the freedom to decide how to do that. But we must remember that freedom comes with responsibility.

Worldviews

There are many today who hold to *metaphysical naturalism*. In their view, the universe is just a material universe, nothing else. Darwin's evolutionary theory of origins provided an materialist explanation for the biological life we see around us. But by holding on to *metaphysical naturalism*, any life that emerged was totally by chance. The shortcoming of this viewpoint is that it cannot provide any meaning or purpose to life. Darwin himself realized that it also meant that evolutionary theory just evolved by chance and it could not be trusted.

But Genesis 1, gives us a different account of the universe. The universe is not just material, but it has a spiritual imprint upon it which gives it purpose. Furthermore, humans are not just physical creatures but are endowed with the God's image. We are not just natural creatures but supernatural creatures as well. The rest of Hebrew scripture does not have any perception of humans as other than the combination of natural and supernatural; if you will, we are souls, creatures (*nephesh chai*) with a body and a spirit. This *metaphysical supernaturalism* gives us the ability to account for the human values and morals which guide our everyday lives.

The problem for those who hold to a *metaphysical naturalism*, is that they have a worldview that cannot account for human morals and values, and yet they live their lives as if they do. Their worldview is not consistent with their lives and requires them to make a leap of faith to account for how they live their lives. Our worldview is consistent with our lives (even if we imperfectly live according to them).

This provides the basis for Walton's "two-layer cake," (p. 114) where the lower, natural/material layer is where we can scientifically investigate secondary causes of things that happen and the upper, supernatural layer is of primary causes, where God works, sometimes transcendently and sometimes within the processes of the material layer. Science is constricted to *methodological naturalism*, it can only study the natural realm, but that does not require one to hold to *metaphysical naturalism* nor prevent one from holding to *metaphysical supernaturalism*. Empirical science is not able to directly detect purpose, but it does not rule out the possibility of considering purpose (intentional processes, teleology) as the best logical explanation. But for those who hold to *metaphysical naturalism*, they are forced to only consider causes with no purpose (dysteleology).

Genesis is not metaphysically neutral, but science classes can be taught that way if they acknowledge the limits of science. Intelligent Design theory wants science to acknowledge its limits and to be metaphysically neutral about conclusions that cannot be fully proven one way or another, such as with biological artifacts that seem to be irreducibly complex (biological structures that require many parts which need to be functional all at once in order for the structure to work).